

EDITORIAL – MINISTRY IS TOUGH

Paul Beasley-Murray

The first sermon I preached in my present church was on 1 Cor 16.9: "I will stay... for a wide door for effective work has opened to me". I sought in my sermon to speak of the opportunities for Christian mission today. I admitted that in many ways the UK is a depressing mission field, with each new census revealing the church in ever greater decline. The church is becoming increasingly marginalised and its ministry is viewed as increasingly irrelevant. Its ministers have been likened to charcoal burners and alchemists, engaged in processes long obsolete and intellectually untenable. However, I maintained that despite decline there are signs of hope. One of the signs of hope is that, although many people may have given up on church, they find it difficult to shut God out of their lives. In this post-Christian, post-modern age, people are still searching for meaning and values. Here is a door of opportunity for the Gospel.

The sermon did not just focus on the opportunities for effective mission. I went on to deal with the latter part of the text, "and there are many adversaries". Although not a fundamentalist, I believe in the reality of the demonic, and that wherever there is opportunity for the Gospel, there is always opposition. It's my conviction that the Devil doesn't bother to oppose a lame-duck enterprise - but he is concerned where there is an individual or group of people who really mean business with God.

As most ministers have discovered to their cost, such opposition does not always come from without the church, but all too often from within. In the words of one wit, "Who needs enemies, when you've got members like that?" There is a well-known story about a young minister in his first church visiting one of the church's elder statesmen. In an attempt to make conversation he began, "You must have seen a great many ministers in your time". "Yes", replied the old man, "and I've been against them all". There are far too many people in our churches who wish to hold onto forms of worship or organisational structures, which though good in their time, now obstruct the church from going out in mission. In the process of seeking to bring about the necessary changes, all too often ministers get hurt themselves. True, sometimes ministers

have only themselves to blame - they may, for instance, have failed to understand even the basics of the management of change. However, the root difficulty is often the sinfulness and stubbornness to be found in the hearts of God's people.

Ministry is tough. It is not without significance that one of the aims of the RBIM is to enable ministers to "survive". Hopefully this issue of Ministry Today will be of help to those for whom survival is currently the name of the game. The longer I have reflected on my own calling to ministry, the more I have become conscious of the necessary place of the Cross in ministry. 'Suffering' - whether it take the form of misunderstanding, rejection or pain - is to be expected for those who follow the Crucified. The great compensation however is that along with 'death' there is also 'resurrection'.

Yours in the thick of it all (!), Paul Beasley-Murray

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SEEK TO STAY OR GO ?

Deciding the future of a ministry facing difficulty

Martin Thorne

In a recent sabbatical study ⁹⁰ of factors affecting the ways in which British Baptists come to their decisions to seek a change of pastorate or ministry it became clear that at least one fifth of all such decisions were prompted to a significant degree by opposition to the pastorate from a 'group' within the church, by conflict

⁹⁰ *Seek to stay or go...* - an unpublished sabbatical report by M.G. Thorne, - including tables and data from 100+ pastoral moves amongst Baptist pastors